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The Igbo Yam Barn: *Tradition, Storage, and Celebration*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Photo by J. Stocker around the
1930s. British Museum.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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Introduction Yam is an essential crop in Igbo culture, often referred to as the “king crop.” It is not just a source of food but also a symbol of wealth, hard work, and prestige. Ndi Igbo have developed an efficient way of storing yams in structures called “Ọba jị”, or yam barns. These barns contain...

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Introduction

Yam is an essential crop in Igbo culture, often referred to as the “king crop.” It is not just a source of food but also a symbol of wealth, hard work, and prestige. Ndi Igbo have developed an efficient way of storing yams in structures called “Ọba jị”, or yam barns. These barns contain wooden racks known as mkpà, where yams are carefully arranged for storage. While other ethnic groups in the region also build yam barns, the Igbo method is particularly notable for its organization and cultural significance.

02

Yam Cultivation and Storage

Yam farming in Igbo society is traditionally the responsibility of men. The crop is planted in large mounds arranged in rows, known as ògbà ubì. This method has been practiced for thousands of years, as yam was first domesticated in West Africa. The Igbo grow different species

of yam, each ranked based on its quality, taste, and economic value.

After harvesting, yams must be stored properly to prevent spoilage. The *Ọba jì* is an open-air structure built with wooden poles and ropes, designed to allow ventilation while keeping the yams dry. Wealthy farmers who own large yam barns are highly respected in the community and may even receive traditional titles as recognition for their agricultural success.



An Igbo man tying yams onto a large frame made of stakes inside an oba ji, yam barn. He is sitting on a carved stool made for titled men. Photo by J Stocker, 1930s. British Museum.

03

The New Yam Festival (*Iri Jì Ohuru*)

The *Iri Jì Ohuru*, or New Yam Festival, is one of the most important

annual celebrations among the Igbo. It takes place around August, marking the end of the rainy season and the conclusion of *ụnwụ*, a period of food scarcity before the new harvest.

During this festival, the Igbo give thanks to their gods for a successful harvest. The deities honoured include *Njoku*, *Ahịa Ji Oku*, *Ife Ji Oku*, and *Ala*, the Earth Mother. The first yam of the season is traditionally offered to these deities before the people are allowed to eat from the new harvest. The festival is celebrated in the market square of every Igbo settlement, featuring feasting, dancing, and traditional rituals.



"Nme-Nme Iri Ji" New Yam Celebration. Photo by Karex Adventures.

04

Cultural Significance of Yam

Yam represents prosperity, diligence, and survival in Igbo culture. The size of a man's yam barn is often used to measure his wealth and

status. In many communities, the ability to harvest and store large quantities of yam is a source of pride and social recognition.

The Iri Ji Ohuru festival is not just a feast; it is a sacred tradition that reinforces the Igbo people's connection to their ancestors and spiritual beliefs. Even in modern times, yam remains an important part of Igbo agriculture and cultural identity.

The New Yam Festival: A Cultural and Spiritual Celebration in Igboland



Yam barn, Onitsha Province (now Anambra-Enugu), Eastern Region, Nigeria, 1967. Photo: Drs. G.W. Grootenhuis.

The Igbo method of yam storage and their celebration of the New Yam Festival highlight the deep agricultural knowledge and traditions of the Igbo people. These practices, passed down through generations, continue to play a vital role in Igbo society today. Understanding and preserving these traditions is essential for maintaining the cultural heritage of one of Africa's most influential ethnic groups.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odi

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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